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Considerations in the design of 'new' academic library spaces in Kenya

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Abstract

The Kenyan university education system has experienced tremendous growth and expansion in the recent past. One major requirement for accreditation by the Commission for University Education is that a university must have a library befitting its student population and the diversity of its degree programs.

To qualify for accreditation, demonstrate quality and attract students, many universities have had to put up new library buildings or expand/restructure existing ones. While it may be obvious that this is a chance to design the buildings with the 21st century learner in mind, many libraries continue to borrow and extend the traditional library model, which was largely collection focused.

This paper will look at the recently re/designed library spaces and seek to find out the extent to which these spaces cater for today's learner. Since the current information universe is becoming increasingly technological, the paper will cover how technology has been infused in these spaces to support student learning now and in the future. Response to the not so new Information/Research Commons concept and the increasing need to align library services to the core university mission which is student learning will also be assessed.

This paper provides ideas and suggestions on how academic libraries in the developing countries can repurpose and refocus their spaces to allow and encourage exploration, collaboration, discussion and creation of new knowledge. The library space itself ought to contribute to the learning process.

Keywords
Academic libraries; library spaces; student learning; Kenya

Introduction

Higher education in Kenya has experienced tremendous growth in the recent past. From four fully-fledged universities in 1987, the number had risen to seven public universities by 2007 and today, the country has a total of 30 fully-fledged chartered public universities and 18 chartered private universities and 13 institutions of higher education with Letters of Interim Authority. This is as a result of a rise in new degree offerings, upgrading of public university constituent colleges to fully-fledged universities, the establishment of more constituent colleges and the expansion of private universities [Munene 2016]. This growth has been accompanied by an impressive rise in student enrolments; while at independence in 1963 only about 1,000 students were attending university in Kenya, the overall number has grown steadily over the years. For instance, the total number of university students rose steadily from 67,558 students in 2004 to about 240,551 in 2012 and 470,152 in 2015 [ICEF Monitor, 2016]. The rise in student numbers is felt more in public universities which are cheaper unlike in private universities which are expensive with limited capacity.

Growth in university education, world over, can be understood mainly within the context of the emphasis laid by governments on education, especially higher education, as a driver of socio-economic development. All nations expect that universities contribute in a sustainable manner to development by equipping the citizenry with relevant knowledge, skills and values through diverse

academic programs and generation of knowledge through research. In Kenya, there is a widespread belief that a university degree is necessary to get a good job, this has elevated the importance of a university degree and made education a necessity for success, thus, increasing the need among many to access university education.

In Kenya, just like in other developing economies the expansion and growth described above has not been without challenges. Such factors as dwindling funding, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, inadequate and poorly trained staff, poor governance, new and ever-changing technologies and pedagogies continue to bedevil higher education in Kenya. It is important to observe that, the expansion, especially in public universities was not well planned, small middle-level colleges and polytechnics were quickly converted to universities putting a strain on existing facilities and staff. Today, most of these 'just born' universities are struggling to establish and achieve a university 'look' with regard to their buildings, facilities and staff.

University libraries are not unaffected by these changes and challenges, new universities are having to build libraries and older ones have had to either construct new library buildings or renovate/expand existing ones so as to accommodate these changes. This provides an opportunity for university librarians to not only cater for the increased number of users but also the varied and changing user needs and expectations witnessed on campus today.

Academic Libraries in Kenya

The history of university libraries in Kenya dates back to the inception of the first university –University of Nairobi in 1956 which started as the Royal Technical College, then transformed into the second University College in East Africa in 1961 and later, in 1970, became the first university in Kenya. As university education has expanded and grown, so have university libraries. Each university in Kenya has a library, that is, in most cases as old as the university itself. Over the years, these libraries have made various adaptations so as to cater for growing numbers and the evolving structure and delivery in higher education resulting from technology.

Apart from the need to support teaching, learning and research, university libraries in Kenya are established majorly as fulfilment of the requirements of the Commission for University Education (CUE). Among the most stringent conditions for the award of charters and accreditation of academic programs is the need for a befitting library in terms of 'size, quality and equipment'. The Commission for Higher Education, Standards and Guidelines for University Libraries in Kenya elaborate what a library and information service in a university should look like.

As regards library space designing, the standards expressly state that 'the design of the building shall enable the library to develop, and provide services that are responsive to the changing library and information needs of learning and scholarship'. The library building is expected to have a 'high degree of flexibility or adaptability so that the use of space can be changed by rearranging the furniture and equipment'. Librarians ought to be involved librarians in planning of the library building. Incorporation of technology as per these standards is an integral part of the design. Also, the importance of collaboration between the librarians and teaching faculties is emphasized, and to assess library services, the standards require librarians to incorporate the concept of learning outcomes [Commission for Higher Education, 2012].

As part of adherence to these standards and guidelines, universities planning to construct new libraries go on benchmarking trips to local libraries which are considered modern and futuristic. Some universities send one or two persons, especially the architect, abroad, to learn and bring home current trends. These trips generate a lot of input for the designs although there has been a tendency to duplicate without considering the needs of those served by the library, today and in the future.

Purposing Library Spaces

While the role of the library remains information oriented, in the 21st century, with the digitization of content and the pervasiveness of the internet, information is no longer confined to print and accessible in a single, physical place. Seal [2015] describes the academic library of the mid to late twentieth century as a 'quiet but sterile' place focused on acquiring, processing and storing collections as well as facilitating serious scholarly work. It was a place for quiet study for graduate students and some faculty members but a place to avoid for undergraduate students. Today, as observed by Holland [2015], students and teachers no longer need a library just for access. Instead, they require a place that encourages participatory learning and allows co-construction of knowledge from a variety of sources. Seaman [2006] points to the profound effect of changes in higher education on academic libraries and observes that developments in pedagogy and a shift in millennials' learning styles from centric to collaborative, have affected how librarians develop and structure information services. Transformative changes in culture, technology, publishing, research, and pedagogy require equally transformative changes in libraries.

Key to this change in focus, is library design and space planning; a gradual evolution has been observed, ranging from furnishings and architecture to culture and purpose. Academic libraries are no longer focused on accommodating print and physical collections, instead they are continually working towards being the facilitators in the business of knowledge acquisition by users involved in learning, teaching and research activities [Choy and Goh, 2016]. In an effort to accommodate changes brought about by the rise in student numbers and degree programs, university libraries in Kenya have the opportunity to repurpose, reconfigure, rethink, reshape and refocus library spaces so as to be 21st century compliant. It is now possible to move away from the largely traditional academic library that did not allow conversation, food or drink and thus kept away students [Seal, 2015] towards a warm welcoming and homely, common space that encourages exploration, creation and collaboration between students, faculty and a wider community. A space designed to bring together the best of the physical and the digital to create learning hubs.

Recent publications on higher education affirm and recognize the need to create and redesign educational environments that address the needs and expectations of learners. In response to this growing need and demand for spaces that are more conducive to learning and the desire to make a more visible impact on student learning, academic libraries in developed countries have successfully implemented various forms of the 'Commons' concept to suit their needs. Oliveira [2015] in his analysis of literature, observes that library spaces such as non-traditional facilities like *cafés and classrooms*, *informal spontaneous spaces, social learning spaces, computer stations, group and individual study areas, communal, flexible, collaborative,* as well as areas where *solitude* and *quietness* prevail are now found in academic libraries. Indeed, the library has shifted from a reading and book storage site to a 'center of interactive learning…it continues to flourish with student activity; it has developed into a center of learning and collaboration (Hisle, 2005); the information commons has succeeded in getting students into the library (Lippincott, 2006).

Library space in university libraries, therefore, cannot be ignored, its design and utilization, accessibility to services and materials, and use of technology, generate a lot of interest since they are the main determinants of the usability of these libraries. Leighton and Weber [1999] pointed out that library buildings as compared to other academic buildings must be able to accommodate change readily. When designing 21st century library spaces, it is important to respond to all user needs. Libraries have had to adapt and embrace technology and changes in pedagogy. Academic libraries are designing more group work spaces and adding more technology to accommodate those students coming in with their gadgets or those coming to borrow technology tools. Library spaces created in this century are expected to foster interaction and collaboration. Students should find it easy to study, relax, collaborate and socialize in the library.

It is on this premise that this paper chose to look at newly built university libraries in Kenya. Two specific cases were of interest – both big in size and modernistic, great architecture, one private and one public, and both launched after the year 2010. The aim was to find out whether trends in library space designs were considered and attempts made to move away from traditional libraries. Using recent literature on 21st century library space designs and characteristics, a checklist was developed to help identify features in these libraries that cater for today's learner's needs including technology-rich and service-rich environments. To understand considerations made in space designs and use, interviews were held with each of the two university librarians of these libraries. Both the checklist and the interview schedule were based on Clugston [2013] and, Beard and Dale [2010] provisions that libraries should include flexible or multi-functional open-space that can be reconfigured to suit a variety of functions. That spaces should allow for creation of choice so as to suit different learning styles and needs. Other principles include provision of formal and informal spaces; inclusion of collaborative and social spaces; and individual silent study. These principles are also found in the Standards and Guidelines for University Libraries in Kenya.

KENYATTA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY – The Post-Modern Library

Kenyatta University (KU) started as a university college of University of Nairobi established through an Act of parliament in 1970. Its library – Kenyatta University College Library, back then, was housed in a two floor building which was previously a canteen for soldiers on transit. It had a seating capacity of 200 and 15,000 volumes. By 1978, the numbers had grown, creating pressure for space. In 1984, the library moved to a new building whose second phase was completed in 2005 and converted to a reading area. With 30,000 students and 350,000 volumes, there was still need for more space. The construction of the Post-Modern library was completed in 2011.

The five storey building modeled on a United States of America library and funded by the governments of Kenya and China, has a seating capacity of 6,000 and serves 50,000 users. Service provision is discipline oriented with materials on Social Sciences housed on the 1st floor, Humanities - 2nd floor, Science and Technology - 3rd floor, Research and Health - 4th leaving the 5th floor as a reading space for graduate students and faculty. Away from space for the collection, the design of the Post-Modern Library has group study rooms on each floor which allow interaction among users. Apparently there are more users interested in quiet study as compared to those wanting to discuss. For this reason, the open-space area is a silent reading area. At the basement, there is another open space termed 'noisy area' that can sit 1200 where students can engage without much restriction especially around exam time. There is a lounge on the ground floor where students relax and socialize as they ready newspapers and magazines. In all these areas, most of what you see is a traditional library seating – tables, chairs, carrels; the furnishings do not reflect the variety of preferences you would expect from such a big user group. The flexibility to create one's own learning environment by rearranging or reconfiguring is not yet a reality.

A major reason for building the Post-Modern library was to embrace technology in service delivery. The computer labs on each floor demonstrate this. When the library was launched, there were computers available in the open areas for users, however, librarians observed that users preferred coming with their own gadgets and have since removed them. There is sufficient cabling to allow charging of devices and access to the internet. A wireless connectivity is also possible. A laudable feature in present day library spaces is the support given by library staff. On each of the floors, there are librarians close by, ready to offer support. The Post Modern library has Information Communication Technology (ICT) staff in each of the computer labs to ensure that users do not get frustrated.

Discussions with the librarian revealed that the design of the Post-Modern library provided for a café and kitchenette where users would access food and drink. This space, today, has tables and chairs for study, access to food is not nearby. It is good to know that the provision is there and that the university librarian is cognizant of this and says 'we are headed there, we are changing but we are not yet there'. Already there are water points where users drink water, they are yet to be allowed to sit with their water bottles in the spaces provided.

Kenyatta University is home to learners who are differently abled and the Post-Modern library design does not leave them out. There is a specially designed space that accommodates physical, print and hearing disability. This space is infused with adaptive technology, multimedia workstations and library staff offer support.

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EAST AFRICA LIBRARY – The Bishop McCauley Memorial Library

In 1961, the Catholic Bishops of the Association of Member Episcopal Conference of Eastern Africa (EMECEA) discussed the possibility of establishing a Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) to articulate the needs of the region. This did not take off until 1980 when approvals were given to the planners. While planning the structures, the need for a library was realized and a library fund created. A joint library was launched in 1983 to serve both the university and St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Nairobi. The idea of a joint library was later abandoned due to administrative issues.

The university community was growing and new materials were being added to the collection. Severally, the library was remodeled, extended and various adaptations made to accommodate this growth. In the university's 2002-2011 strategic plan it was resolved to build a new library whose construction commenced in May 2008. An Ultra-Modern Learning Resource Centre (LRC), an architectural marvel, was launched in 2011. The LRC had eight components : *University library, Information and Communications Technology offices (ICT), Language Laboratory/ Multimedia and Curriculum Centre, E-Publishing Centre, Cafeteria, University Bookshop, Archives, Electronic and virtual Museum, and an ultra-modern Conference Facility.*

The Bishop McCauley Memorial Library's five floors have a seating capacity of 3000 and serve 6500 users. The planning team was comprised of librarians and architects; it was a campus-wide committee though there was no student representation. The committee benchmarked locally and also sent the architect to the Library of Alexandria to collect ideas.

The library spaces provide an open room concept for users to gather and collaborate. There are group and quiet study areas – up to 120 private reading carrels. In as much as most of the seating is the traditional library type, there is some comfortable furniture where users can relax. There is a cafeteria in the building, although not part and parcel of the library, it is close by. The lobby area is flexible enough to host exhibitions and events. The library is largely green with a lot of natural light

and a garden. The basement has a 'reflection' spot with a fountain where users requiring solitude and inspiration can disappear. Reference and instructional services are easy to approach.

Most adaptations in the old library were done to incorporate technology. The new library is equipped with smart boards, computer labs with over 150 internet-connected PCs, television screens for presentations, internet-ready tables for use with personal laptops, a multimedia center and wireless hot spots. This technology rich environment has ICT staff and librarians are on stand-by.

Away from curriculum support, the library at CUEA provides many other services to enrich not only the experience of the CUEA fraternity but also the community around. It has a children library, an innovation hub that works with the Research and Innovation department, a walk-in virtual studio run with iEARN Kenya, conferencing services and a community service program with a number of high schools. It was interesting to learn that the library is in the process of signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the neighboring public university – Cooperative University, that is yet to build a library, so that their students can use the library at CUEA.

MOVING FORWARD

These two libraries are at a point in their service where the nature and variety of user needs can help gain a sense of whether the spaces built are a success. Looking at the way the library is utilized, there are thoughts around research commons. The KU library has already drawn a proposal on how the postgraduate area can be partitioned to increase usage. The aim is to allow the students to use the space with fewer restrictions. There is also a proposal to establish a data center. Librarians are looking for ways to link students with resources in the virtual space.

The CUEA library is on the other hand implementing its research commons plan. Print journals have been moved out of an enclosed area on the ground floor, tables and a workstation for a research librarian have been brought in. Research materials have been moved from elsewhere in the library to this space that is meant for graduate and postgraduate students. There is now increased cabling in the area to enable computer use. An inner room has lounge seats, a water purifier, a fridge and a coffee maker for the researchers' informal learning and relaxation. There is also an adjacent room where they can discuss and make presentations. According to the librarian, the redesigning is supposed to enrich the user experience of graduate students who are largely seen as the most mistreated on campus. Additionally, there are thoughts to change colors in the whole library to make them warmer, put some pictures on the walls and increase collaboration with other units.

It is worthy observing that these efforts towards taking care of the graduate student may continue to alienate the undergraduate student. As one librarian put it, silence continues to be a defining factor in library use. While graduate students see a noisy library as a 'madhouse', undergraduate students think the lack of noise and the many restrictions make the library uninviting. KU library is ahead in this respect since its 'noisy area' at the basement does not allow noise to permeate to other areas. Libraries with an open plan may need to invest in carpets and sound proofing to have both silent workspaces and lively activity areas.

There are lessons to learn from librarians who have improved library spaces. As academic libraries move forward, it will be important to involve students in these redesigning projects. The two cases above did not have student representation in the planning committees. It is possible that the gaps we see could have been eliminated had they been involved. It is impressive how librarians' ideas have covered student interests over the years but studies have shown that the 'millennials' and 'netizens' want to create and recreate their own learning environments. We can no longer assume that we know

and understand their needs. Considerations in designs and redesigns of academic library spaces should revolve around students.

Conclusion

It is evident that size aspects of academic library spaces have been the major drivers of space designing and planning. In Kenya, we are now starting to witness a new breed of library spaces that are user- focused.   How technology is accessed and used in these spaces is another major consideration. Currently, service delivery to a large extent follows the traditional models though changing. Academic libraries in Kenya are learning from their counterparts in the West, they are observing how the existing spaces are utilized and slowly working towards creating spaces that foster inspiration, collaboration, interaction and creativity.

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